Framework for Planning Even Start Family Literacy Program Evaluations

Focus Questions

Do **families** participate intensely enough and stay long enough to achieve goals?

How much **progress** have adults and children made toward intended outcomes?

Are the **service providers** the correct mix to match families' needs and goals?

Are **instructional** services of high quality?

> This chapter introduces the framework that organizes the discussion of evaluation planning in the remainder of the *Guide*. Chapter 2 covers:
> - the conceptual framework for planning local evaluations;
> - a tour of the framework;
> - selecting a focus; and
> - role distinctions between evaluators and staff.

In Chapter 1, we described local Even Start evaluations as including, at a minimum, accurate and representative information about participant outcomes and local project objectives, exploration of an area of program concern (sometimes referred to as a focused inquiry), objective collection and synthesis of information, and recommendations for program improvement. There are many ways to design evaluations to meet these expectations and many ways evaluators can frame evaluation questions and combine data collection methods to learn about program processes and outcomes.

Because each of the four core instructional components of the Even Start program model has potential for in-depth exploration, the range of options for crafting an evaluation plan can overwhelm evaluators and program staff. While it is important to be aware of and consider various options before finalizing evaluation questions and firming up an evaluation plan, creating an effective and feasible evaluation plan involves zeroing in on one or two areas of concern.

The Conceptual Model for Planning Local Evaluations

The conceptual framework (see the figure on page 14) is a way to organize the discussion of evaluation planning and consider the range of options.

The framework's five "building blocks" show the logic of Even Start—how strategies are intended to produce outcomes. At the same time, the building blocks also represent potential sources of evaluation questions. The framework puts family literacy program theory together with the systematic thinking of evaluators.

In a given year, only some combinations of building blocks will be targeted for in-depth review and new data collection (although evaluators also often work with data that project staff members have previously collected). For example, an evaluator tracking children's progress on various milestones is likely to focus on collecting data from benchmark measures administered over time. She may not plan to collect new data about early childhood instruction systematically, e.g. via classroom observations, but she will need some background information from staff about the curricular goals that inform instruction in order to interpret the results of progress monitoring.

Although Even Start evaluators may not always collect new data or formally analyze information about each block in a given year's evaluation (other than participant outcomes), to some degree each framework building block plays a part in any evaluation plan.

Evaluation plans typically call for collecting data to answer specific questions. By addressing different questions each year, the evaluator can provide in-depth information on all program components and areas over the course of a four-year cycle.

The framework organizes the next five chapters. Chapters describe the evaluation questions, topics, and strategies that make up each building block: participant learning outcomes (Chapter 3); program design (Chapter 4); program implementation (Chapter 5); participation (Chapter 6); and learning milestones (Chapter 7).

A Tour of the Framework

The first feature to notice about the framework on page 14 is that it does not follow the typical linear form of logic models and conceptual frameworks.
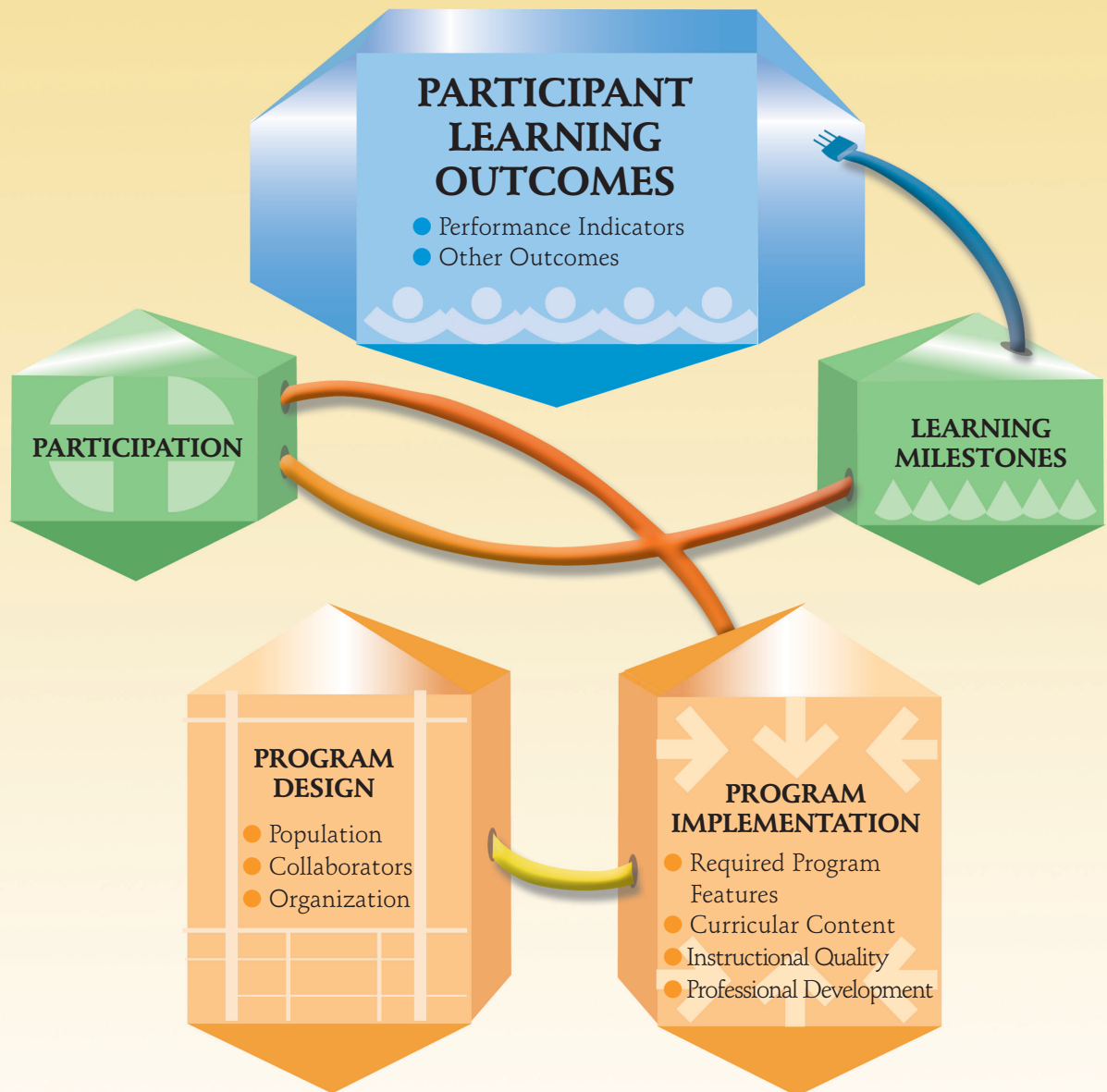
A "through line" (the thick cord) runs through the building blocks—from program design to program implementation to participation to learning milestones to participant learning outcomes—to show the path of relationships among the building blocks. Of course, different combinations of building blocks may interact—the assessment of the quality of program implementation might stimulate re-consideration of some aspects of program design, or less-than-ideal participant learning outcomes could spark examination of participation patterns.

Objective information about any one building block will affect the interpretation of data about other areas and stimulate new questions. The framework shows that the cycle of evaluation planning is continuous in the same way that the cycle of program improvement is continuous.

The second important feature of the framework is the prominent placement of **PARTICIPANT LEARNING OUTCOMES** at the top. No matter what other areas evaluators examine, all local Even Start evaluators should review and report on participant learning outcomes each year, disaggregating results to find patterns. Evaluators should present the results for the state's performance indicators along with other important learning outcomes, including any project objectives included in the approved application. Basic questions about outcomes always include:

- *Are projects meeting state-required performance indicators?*
- *Are projects meeting the outcome objectives stated in their approved applications?*
- *Are adults and children achieving other important learning outcomes?*

Framework for Planning Local Evaluations

PARTICIPANT LEARNING OUTCOMES
- Performance Indicators
- Other Outcomes

PARTICIPATION

LEARNING MILESTONES

PROGRAM DESIGN
- Population
- Collaborators
- Organization

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
- Required Program Features
- Curricular Content
- Instructional Quality
- Professional Development

The "thick cord" shows the most common path of relationships among the building blocks of evaluation, that is, design affects implementation which affects outcomes—mediated by the extent of participation by families and their achievement of learning milestones. See examples on pages 20 and 21 for other paths of interactions.

Evaluators also use participant learning outcomes for other purposes. Outcomes are the backdrop for understanding the influence and effectiveness of program strategies, and for examining the effects of varying degrees of participation on progress. (See more about outcomes in Chapter 3.) The two areas in the bottom layer of the framework, **PROGRAM DESIGN** and **PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION**, form the foundation for examining program processes and quality. Even though basic features of program design, e.g. the population targeted, the key partners and so forth, are specified at the time of grant award, wise evaluators work with project leaders to examine the viability of those features over time. Note: The basic scope and objectives of the approved project cannot be changed without consultation with the state coordinator.

Common questions about design include:

- *How have changes in community demographics affected recruitment?*
- *Does the basic program model continue to meet the needs of families recruited for the program? If not, what types of refinements are needed?*
- *Are the service providers the correct mix to meet families' needs?*

Problems with participation or insubstantial outcomes may trigger an examination of program design at any point in the project life cycle. Evaluation tasks that can inform design changes include assessing needs systematically, determining alignment between resources and needs, and setting priorities. (See more about evaluating program design features in Chapter 4.)

Evaluators make major contributions to Even Start program quality by collecting data on the delivery of instructional services. Needing data to inform and justify modest refinements as well as more substantive changes, program leaders value objective perspectives on program operations.

Common questions about implementation include:

- *Is the program implemented as intended?*
- *Are instructional services of high quality?*

Many Even Start families face challenging circumstances that may affect their motivation to participate consistently in Even Start. Staff need to be well-prepared for and supported in their roles in order to motivate families. Evaluation questions about staff and family perceptions can also be important in evaluating implementation:

- *Do staff members feel prepared for their roles?*
- *What are participants' perceptions of the value of program services?*

Problems with participation and disappointing levels of progress frequently prompt a detailed evaluative review of the quality of program delivery, especially the delivery of instructional services. Methods for assessing implementation are wide-ranging, and include surveys and record reviews as well as interviews and observations. As described in Chapter 5,

standards for comparison are as important for interpreting the results of implementation evaluations as they are for understanding the magnitude of participant gains on learning measures.

The framework on page 14 shows **PARTICIPATION** and **LEARNING MILESTONES** in the "middle layer" between program-related areas and outcomes. This placement is intended to convey the role of these two areas as intermediaries for understanding program outcomes.

Much attention has been paid in Even Start to the intensity and duration of **PARTICIPATION**. The combination of high expectations and a high needs population leads, as one would expect, to wide variations in patterns of participation. Similarly, the flexibility of the Even Start model to adapt service delivery mechanisms to populations means that service intensity also varies widely. As the framework shows, participation can influence or mediate results in other areas.

Common questions about participation include:

- *Do programs offer sufficient hours of service and an adequately flexible schedule for each age cohort to realize intended outcomes?*
- *Do participants attend sufficient hours of service to realize intended outcomes?*
- *Do participants stay in programs long enough to achieve their goals?*

As Chapter 6 describes, program staff members may need help setting up systems to collect participation data accurately. Once systems are in place, the evaluator can use participation data to answer questions about process and implementation and also analyze data to understand other results. Examples of the latter are comparing the results of progress measures or performance indicators for participants with high and low rates of participation, or categorizing sites according to rates of family retention and participation and examining the differences in practice by site to see what factors help motivate participation.

LEARNING MILESTONES has a prominent position in the framework because focusing evaluation attention on intermediate steps has potential for improving programs. Evaluators can help project staff set up systems to track the progress of adults and children toward outcomes and help staff members understand the resulting patterns for the most common type of evaluation question:

- *How much progress are participants making toward achieving short-term learning outcomes?*

While progress toward benchmarks can be helpful in understanding why outcomes have or have not been achieved, the results can also be used to pinpoint areas of need within program operations and instructional processes for further examination. Finally, as described in Chapter 7, tracking progress on benchmarks motivates staff members and participants—encouraging continuous improvement on the part of staff and parents.

An evaluator will consider all five of the framework's building blocks—participant learning outcomes, program design, program implementation, participation, and learning milestones along the way to outcomes—and their interrelationships when crafting an evaluation plan. The evaluation plan will always address participant learning outcomes. While any one of the other building blocks might be a target for focused inquiry and new data collection, the evaluation plan will likely emphasize one or two areas. The choice of focus depends on the stage of program development, issues or concerns that have been identified, and resources available for local evaluation.

Selecting A Focus

Even Start projects are typically funded in four-year cycles. Areas of focus and evaluation questions change as the project evolves, and evaluation plans should look different in each year of the cycle (and in subsequent cycles). As project staff members become clearer about how to maximize outcomes for families, new strategies emerge to be tested. Expectations for what can be learned from local evaluations also increase over time.

During the **start-up year,** Even Start staff members often struggle to put all the required program elements in place. In the first year, project leaders are hiring qualified staff, ironing out partnership agreements, choosing curricula and securing instructional materials, recruiting families, putting accountability systems in place, and so forth. As a result, some first-year projects are slow to enroll families and get them participating regularly in all four components. Program energy is directed toward implementing the proposed project design.

Evaluation for a first-year project should focus on program design and implementation. Appropriate evaluation questions for the first year might be:

- *Are families participating consistently in all four core instructional components?*
- *To what extent are curriculum objectives, instructional materials, and pedagogical approaches research-based?*
- *Which recruitment strategies seem most effective for targeting the population in greatest need of literacy services?*
- *How well do program partners and collaborators understand the goals of Even Start, and do they agree with the goals?*

During a program's first year of operation, the evaluation should include baseline assessments to measure participant learning outcomes even if participants have not yet been in the program long enough to qualify for inclusion in the state's performance indicator reporting. The evaluator works with first-year program staff to ensure understanding of the required outcomes and measures, identify additional learning outcomes and measures appropriate for the population served, set up systems to track and record outcomes, and perform quality control checks on the initial administration of assessments and recording of data.

It may take a while for staff members to become skilled in administering and scoring instruments, especially instruments to assess language. The first year offers a good opportunity to provide staff with training and guided practice and to work out any misinterpretations associated with test administration such as setting basal and ceiling items, timing assessments, clarifying or re-stating directions vs. coaching, and so forth. This work—especially setting up data collection forms and data management systems—lays the foundation for accurate reporting in future years. All Even Start projects must put basic record keeping systems in place to respond to state-required and local information needs.

By the **second year of operation**, program staff members often struggle to retain families long enough to make important gains and try to address some families' erratic or limited participation patterns. In addition to tracking learning outcomes, the evaluator may focus on family participation with questions such as:

- *What are the participation patterns of Even Start adults and children?*
- *How is participation related to progress on benchmarks? (learning milestones)*
- *Which program features encourage participation? (program implementation)*
- *What are the barriers to participation? (program implementation)*
- *How do low and high participators differ in their success with outcomes? (participant outcomes)*

The range of questions above implies attention to more than participation alone, of course. Depending on the scope of the local evaluation, the evaluation plan might involve data collection in one or more areas.

The evaluations of **mature programs** are likely to reflect the sophistication of refined strategies, attempts to maximize outcomes, an understanding of different approaches for families with different profiles, and/or interest in rigorous documentation of outcomes. Evaluations of mature programs might employ a variety of ways to assess program outcomes, including measures that supplement required state performance indicator measures, analyzing the relationships among the results of different measures, assessment of longer-term effects (following up families that have successfully exited Even Start), and/or various subgroup analyses.

In the preceding examples, the program's stage of development suggested major issues and concerns related to program success. However, there may be times when mature programs face issues that newer programs experience. For example, recruiting and retaining eligible families may emerge periodically as a challenge even for long-standing programs. Certainly, lack of learning gains can be a problem for programs at any stage of development—it is especially notable as a problem given the small enrollments in Even Start programs.

Evaluators and project directors should expend evaluation resources on the most serious issues facing programs, that is, those issues that are hindering participant progress. This means that evaluations will often focus on program implementation and participation, and raise questions about the quality and intensity of instruction such as:

- *How do the oral language development opportunities available to Even Start children vary by classroom?*
- *To what extent do home visit plans reflect areas of educational need identified by the diagnostic assessments?*
- *How much more instructional time are Even Start children receiving compared to others of the same age?*
- *How much instructional time is required for adults who begin at different levels to achieve a grade level gain in reading and mathematics?*

In most cases, project directors and staff members are aware of concerns that warrant further exploration, and evaluators can elicit those concerns in initial planning discussions. In some cases, evaluators may need to prompt discussion about other sources of concern, such as comparing a program's results with statewide averages or raising questions about areas that monitoring visits have identified as weak. Components or whole programs may be officially designated by the state as low performing as a result of monitoring visits or during annual program progress reviews. Project directors should share any and all concerns with the evaluator to assure that evaluation plans will concentrate on the areas that most need improvement.

Projects facing several serious issues may need to allocate more resources to evaluation to address several areas and gather continuous feedback about strategies. For example, a floundering project may need the evaluator's help to monitor monthly participation, observe and provide feedback on the implementation of instructional emphases in all component areas, design and select progress monitoring tools, and assess participant motivation.

This multi-year example is provided to illustrate how formal inquiries build upon annual outcomes. The focused inquiries carried out by Rosemary Hodges, the evaluator of the Eastern Wayne County (NY) Even Start Program, in addition to annual reporting of outcomes asked:

Year 1

- *To what extent do Even Start parents understand and use recommended language strategies with preschool children?*

Year 2

- *To what extent is Even Start's relationship with local primary schools perceived as supportive? Does Even Start's support make a difference for children who are not meeting the school's grade level benchmarks in reading?*

Year 3

- *How does the support of a literacy specialist result in changes in the knowledge and teaching behaviors of family educators with preschoolers? Has the literacy specialist made a difference for children who are not meeting the school's grade level benchmarks?*

Year 4

- *How does the support of a literacy specialist result in changes in the knowledge and interactions of family educators with infants and toddlers?*
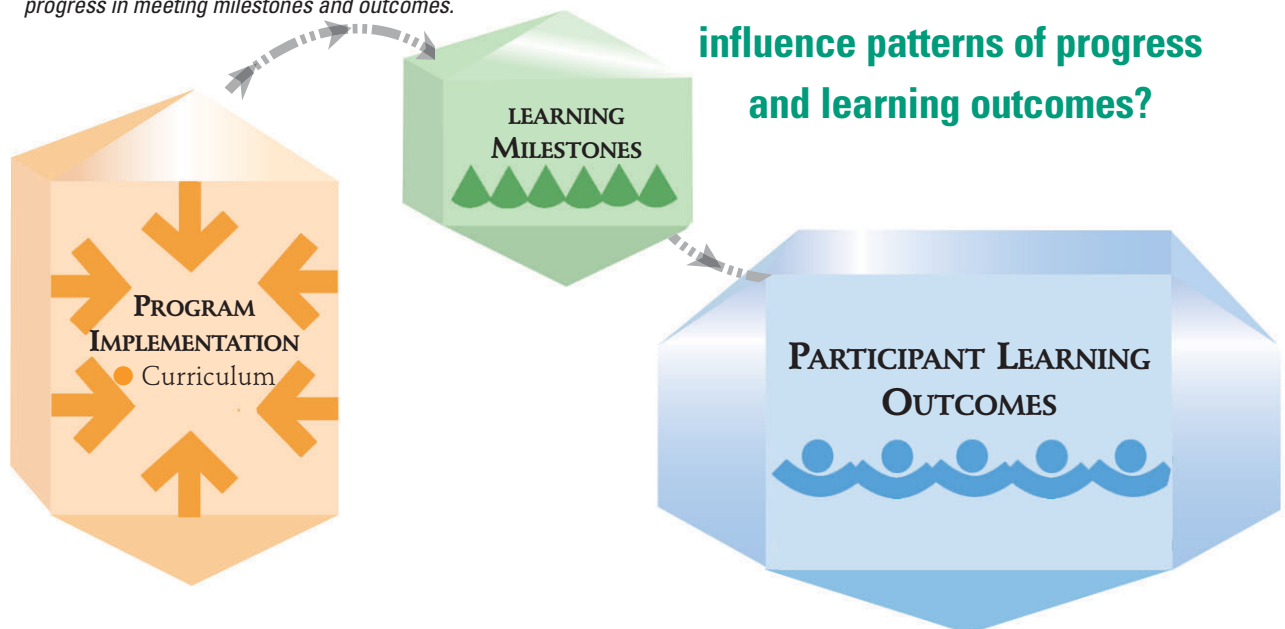
Role Distinctions Between Evaluators and Staff

Project directors, staff members, and evaluators play complementary roles in planning, executing, and using the results of evaluations. In a sense, the evaluator is a special type of project collaborator—a member of the team who brings an independent perspective to project concerns.

Understanding the boundaries between staff and evaluator roles helps to maximize resource use and ensure good working relationships. Essentially, a project director hires an evaluator to exercise professional judgment in collecting data about program issues and analyzing the resulting information. In practice, the evaluator and project staff members may together refine the questions and approaches for data collection. The project director has the ultimate responsibility for identifying the information needed to resolve local issues and for entering an agreement with a skilled and experienced evaluator who can provide evidence that will inform decisions.

Evaluators often use data that staff members have collected as part of ongoing project routines. Staff members may require special training to implement data collection procedures in an accurate, systematic, and fair manner. Involving staff members in recording data increases the likelihood that they will find evaluation results credible and useful. When staff members assume at least some of the responsibility for data collection, the project can use the evaluator's time more wisely for analysis and interpretative tasks.

In this example, the assessment of program implementation (different curricula used at different sites) stimulates a look at participants' progress in meeting milestones and outcomes.

How do different curricula influence patterns of progress and learning outcomes?

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION Curriculum

LEARNING MILESTONES

PARTICIPANT LEARNING OUTCOMES

How do varying rates of participation in program components affect learning outcomes?

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION
Four core instructional components

PARTICIPATION Intensity

PARTICIPANT LEARNING OUTCOMES
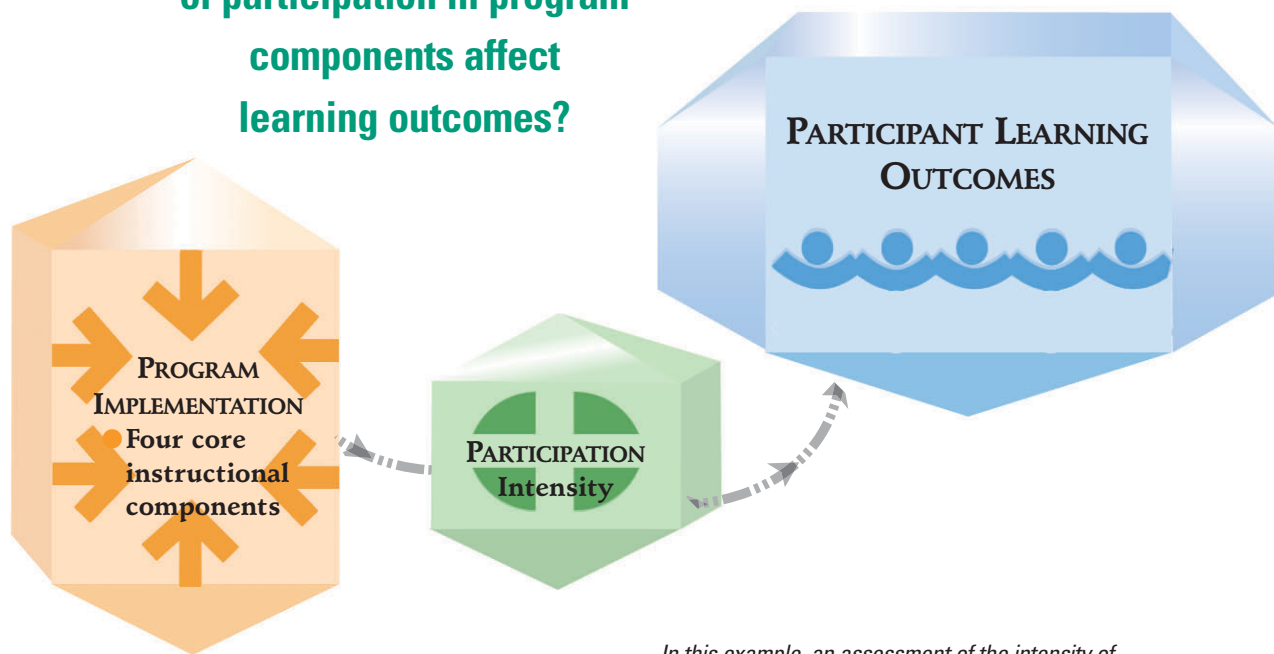
In this example, an assessment of the intensity of participation stimulates examination of how family participation affects learning outcomes.

The next chapter begins a series of chapters about each of the five building blocks in the framework. **PARTICIPANT LEARNING OUTCOMES** is placed first because the measured achievements of adults and children are central to Even Start evaluation. When families have achieved important outcomes, evaluators can document how projects realized those successes. When families have not achieved or made meaningful progress toward outcomes, evaluators can help unpack the reasons by analyzing evidence collected through focused inquiries.

In these ways, looking at project services through the lens of outcomes helps keep services on track. Further, policymakers must rely on outcome information collected with the help of local evaluators, some of which is aggregated at the state level and then provided to the federal Even Start office via the GPRA indicators, to determine the value of Even Start.